



Addressing Moral Decadence in Contemporary Nigerian Society: The Religious Option

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General Note



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ABSTRACT

Right from the colonial invasion and conquest up to the present day, Nigeria has witnessed progressive degeneration of morality. Before the colonial era, the common characteristics of the Nigerian society was the existence of norms that were pivotal to the running of the society. However, in recent times, all the prohibitions that aided the maintenance of high moral and disciplined society have been neglected and abandoned due to the influence of western culture mainly brought about by colonial invasion. This calls for moral reorientation anchored on Christian ethical principles. This paper examined the problem of moral decadence, its

causes, effects and the need to address the ugly trend through the application of Christian moral principles. Decline in parental authority and domestic values, influence of science and technology, media influence, materialism, poverty, and the collapse of discipline in our schools were identified as the major causes of moral decay in Nigeria. The paper maintains that Moral Education based on Christian morality and the application of it in our societal lives is the panacea to current moral disorientation and abuse in our society today.

Key words: Christianity, Morality, Nigeria, Religion, Society.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian society is at a moral crossroads as the country is in a serious moral conflict. Right from the colonial invasion and conquest up to the present day, Nigeria has witnessed progressive degeneration of morality. From one corner of the nation to the other, one can easily notice the fact that the erstwhile social order and character of the traditional Nigerian Society, which guaranteed honest living and maximum security of lives and property have dwindled and given way to a situation of suspicion and distrust. According to Iherue (2011), the interaction between modernity or western civilization and Nigerian precolonial culture has left a moral burden on the Nigerian Society. Today, the result is that the Nigerian society is in a serious moral dilemma. He observed that;

The texture of social life of contemporary Nigerian Society is riddled with family disorientation, divorce, marital infidelity, child abuse, high cost of living which have led to the escalation of other crimes such as ritual killings, child kidnapping, armed robbery, bribery and corruption which have become the order of the day (pp. 10-11).

Similarly, Ugwu (2002) opined that "the Nigerian society is in a state of moral, social, political, economic, legal and educational decay" (p. 16). The brazen display of immoral behaviours in the society today is a clear indication of the high level of moral degradation in the society. To this end, the issue of moral degeneration in the Nigerian society requires an urgent attention.

This work therefore is an attempt to examine and present the Christian ethical teachings as a solution to the present day moral decay in the Nigerian society.

2. MORALITY AND RELIGION

The concept of morality appears very elusive to many. But its elusiveness does not consist in dearth of ideas concerning it, but in the fact that the concept has varying dimensions and perspectives (Okwueze, 2003). Morality just like ethics involves the idea of good or right conduct and it is utterly hostile to bad or wrong conduct. Morality involves a more or less clearly articulated set of beliefs about the nature and conduct of man.

In his view on morality and religion, Agha (2010) posited that morality and religion have been closely connected in the history of human race. Traditional position holds that morality and religion are inseparable. According to this view, the one flows from the other, and morality has its sole basis and justification in religion. He further argued that both have emphasized personality in its relationships and have been concerned with conduct. It follows that the destruction of religion will automatically lead to the destruction of morality also. According to him, when men lose their hold on religion, nothing but moral confusion and decay will be expected. Hence, the confusion of our time in the schools and society. According to *Gaukroger* (2012), it was generally assumed in the 17th-19th centuries that religion provided the unique basis for morality, and without religion, there could be no morality.

However, in furtherance of the discourse, Childress and Macquarie (1986) have this to say on the concept of morality and religion:

Many religious people believe that morality and religion are the same and inseparable; for them either morality is part of religion or their religion is their morality. For others, especially for non-religious people, morality and religion are distinct and separable; religion may be immoral or non-moral and morality may or should be non-religious. Even for some religious people, the two are different and separable. They may hold that religion should be moral and morality should be, but they agree that they may not be (pp. 400-401).

Furthermore, other schools of thought like the secular humanists maintain that the decay of morality cannot bring about religious decline or vice versa. They assert that religion and morality are different entities that can be divorced from each other. They argued that the claim that religion and morality are twin brothers that cannot be separated, can hardly be substantiated. These secular humanists claim that moral duty is towards man not God (Agha, 2012). Be it as it may, no matter the swinging of the moral and religious pendulum, Agha (2012, p. 44), observed three main reasons that signify the connection of morality and religion thus:

1. The world religions give us actual examples of the age-long life's idea and goals. Traditional views see morality as an outflow from religion, indissolubly bound up with it.

2. The theories of philosophical morality are known and consciously followed by a comparatively small proportion of human race, while the world religious number their followers in tens and hundreds of millions. Without religion, there can be no effective morality since morality has its root in the supernatural, just like religion.
3. Moral philosophy must go hand in hand or side by side with religion. Therefore, moral decay is the logical consequence of religious decay.

Again, religion as we all know is a major force in the lives of most Nigerians. Religion naturally speaks to its adherents about right and wrong, good and bad. For many Nigerians, the first and foremost moral guide is their own religion. While the theological doctrines of religion differ substantially, there is a great deal of overlap in moral theology. Broad area of consensus exist regarding concern for our fellow human beings: honesty, our dealings with one another, respect for property and host of other moral issues.

It is therefore summarized here that sometimes there is no distinction made between a moral code and a code of conduct advocated by a religion. The religious people observe their moral code as worship to God and service to humanity while non-religious people try to live morally right as an obligation to the society.

3. CAUSES OF MORAL DECAY IN NIGERIA

Moral degeneration is a universal phenomenon which is negatively affecting many societies, including Nigeria. The Nigerian society, with specific reference to family, school and public life is experiencing serious moral crises. The media is constantly reporting cases of moral breakdowns which are evident in social ills such as a general lack of discipline, violence, promiscuity, vandalism, corruption, high crime waves and the likes. Not a few seems to be wondering about the causes of this moral decay, and its negative effects on the Nigerian society. Here are some of the varied causes of moral degeneration in the Nigerian society.

3.1. Decline in Parental Authority and Domestic Values

The family is universally acknowledged as the fundamental and indispensable cell of all human societies. The family may be regarded as the cradle of civil society, and it is in great measure within the circle of family life that the destiny of the state is fostered. The larger society, the nation, derives its moral tone fundamentally from that of the family. Hence, the strategic importance of domestic life in the moral life of the nation cannot be over looked. However, in recent times, the family and its traditional influence and values are under serious stress in Nigeria.

According to Iwe (1987), the paterfamilias, the head of the family, is steadily losing ground and influence. His headship or authority is no longer unquestionable. The loyalty of his wife and the piety of his children are not easily taken for granted and assured nowadays. In many homes, many fathers have ceased to lead by exemplary lives. Some have become over-indulging and permissive towards their children, to whom they have unwittingly issued tickets of indiscipline and licentiousness. Others have passively succumbed to the unedifying prodding and claims of their spouses. Today the weak, irresponsible and indiscipline paterfamilias have become a domestic liability of serious social concern. The materfamilias or house wives are traditionally and normally the corner-stone of domestic stability, the symbol of domestic loyalty, and patient serenity, the inspirer of domestic thrift and economy, industry and peace. Today in our midst, the opposite is fast becoming the case. These have created serious moral lapse in most families, thereby creating a state of moral decay in the society.

3.2. Influence of Science and Technology

The world has witnessed a giant leap in science and technology. Science and technology has contributed a lot towards making lives better and worth living, however, the rise in science and technology has negatively influenced human morality, especially in Nigeria. Despite other positive uses of internets in areas of research and communication, negative and immoral practices are also learnt from the internet. For example, many pornographic sites abound in the internet. A lot of Nigerian youths patronize these sites which glorify sex and sexual activities. Like the internet, increased access to electronic gadgets like televisions, compact discs, digital video discs and mobile phones, have also contributed to the cause of immoral behaviours among Nigerians today. Through these media, most Nigerians have learnt and embraced cultism, gangsterism, drug abuse, prostitution and violence. When people begin to practice what they learnt from the internet and those electronic gadgets, moral decay becomes the order of the day as we are witnessing in Nigeria today.

3.3. Media Influence

Media influence is used here to refer to both electronic and prints including information dissemination intermediaries. The influence of media just like technology has greatly and negatively impacted on the Nigerian moral standards. The electronic media for instance through the channels of Cable Networks, foreign movies, nollywood home videos, has consistently debased sex and sexual

activities, promoted cultism, rituals, kidnapping and other vices through their programmes. Music, other video chips and even some product adverts, have so much glorified sex, nudity and rascality and made it look like all-comers affairs. The effects and consequences are equal to moral degeneration in the society today.

The print media on the other hand, has flooded our nation with pornographic materials like photographs and other graphic arts designed to stimulate sexual activities. Such sexually explicit materials are sexually arousing to both adults and adolescents. Such materials are usually watched or read in the secret by the youths and thereby learning and exhibiting decayed moral behaviours on daily basis. Smith (2007) stated that;

Teenagers are exposed to sexual materials on TV, in movies, magazines and other modern pornographic devices. Most sexual behavior on television takes place between unmarried adults and ignores the potential negative consequences of sexual intercourse. Thus exposure to sexual contents on media apparatus can lead to more permissive attitudes (p. 48).

The media promote not only product, but moods and in a sense what is and is not important. This has really eroded the social morality the society is expected to exhibit and in turn enhanced more pre-marital and other negative sexual behaviors in the society.

3.4. Materialism

There is a tremendous negative change in the Nigerian economic spheres. Certainly, today the texture of the average Nigerian economic life is excessively materialistic. In the present dispensation, the only convincing logic that is significant and universally accepted to every Nigerian from North to South, East to West is that of excessive material acquisitions and consumerism. The mentality of making money and becoming somebody (the richest man) through corrupt means of acquisition of money and material wealth has invaded and permeated every aspect of Nigerians' moral life. Agha (2019) viewed Materialism as the acquisition of material wealth at the expense of others. He noted that it has been treated as an enemy by the church and the moralists.

This singular factor explains the daily frantic race of the jobless in the town, the shouting of the double faced traders in their deceitful attempts to cheat their customers, the mounting of makeshift toll-gates by legitimate and illegitimate law enforcement agents, the attempts to steal votes from the electorates to seize political posts, the daily scouting for contracts by ghost contractors, the siphoning of public funds by those in power, the eager expectations of office clerks for a tip before they carry a file from one table to the other, and many more forms of immorality in our public and private lives in the society.

The nation is embroiled with an excessive materialistic ideology that portends doom to our collective morality. The destructive acquisitive instinct of the western capitalism has colonized the Nigerian mind such that the dominant philosophy is to acquire money by all means.

3.5. Poverty

There is a high rate of poverty in the society owing to lack of social justice, as a result, people tend to indulge in immoral activities, just to make the ends meet. Tutu (1999) asserted that people become poor due to oppression and injustice brought about by unjust social structures. Stott (1984) postulated that the poor are deprived of the opportunity of having access to food, clothing and shelter. He maintained that the poor constitute a group of powerless people who are socially and politically oppressed. O' Donovan (2000) said that poverty is responsible for the high rate of crime in the urban cities. Poverty is one of the major causes of stealing, prostitution, drug addiction, armed robbery, militancy, kidnapping and crisis in the society. As a result of poverty, some young girls have taken to prostitution as a means of livelihood. The after-effects of prostitution have resulted to some young girls contracting AIDS and other venereal diseases while others have met their premature deaths owing to abortion. This accounts for the rapid spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases in the society.

3.6. The Collapse of Discipline in our Schools

Discipline implies self-control, willingness to learn and function in an acceptable and ordered manner. Thus an atmosphere of discipline is characterized by sense of duty and responsibility, and of self-control and loyalty. Formal teaching and learning as well as any other form of serious socialization requires naturally and normally such an atmosphere. Unfortunately an atmosphere of discipline has been conspicuously lacking in many Nigerian primary and secondary schools. Although, the considerable increase in school enrolment and the gross inadequacy of material resources and personnel have contributed to indiscipline in schools, the most cardinal factor of indiscipline, is in the area of administration, supervision and control. Indiscipline in schools manifests in the following forms: lateness to school, teacher absenteeism, poor environmental sanitation and dirty class rooms, shabbily dressed teachers, strained teacher-headmaster relationship, disrespect for school heads, poor pupil-teacher relationship, and lack of personal professional commitment to duty. These symptoms of indiscipline and disorder assume greater dimensions among the secondary schools, where financial and other exploitation of students, uncontrolled youthful passions, and insubordination abound.

4. EFFECTS OF MORAL DECADENCE ON THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

The state of moral decay in Nigeria has some negative impacts on the country, families and individuals. The following are some of the effects of moral decadence on the Nigerian society:

4.1 Loss of integrity among international community: This is one of the major effects of moral degeneration in Nigeria. The involvement of Nigerian leaders in corruption and other immoral acts has dented the image of the country in the international community. Ituma, (2008) painted the picture thus:

The image of the country in the international arena has become so battered that every Nigerian should psychologically feel a scorching hurt inflicted on his individual psyche. The dent has gone so far that everywhere in the world Nigerians are said to be generally dreaded like mad dogs and criminals, cautiously approached like dangerous snakes, and avoided like lepers (p. 37).

4.2 Socio-Economic Problems: Financial crimes harm both the nation and individuals. It is on record that about 90 percent of monies looted from public treasury are stashed away in private foreign accounts (Uko, 2007). Such lootings have become a recurring decimal in underdeveloped countries, Nigeria inclusive. These are monies that should have been used to build industries and create job opportunities for the teeming population. Instead, unemployment has become the order of the day and people are suffering in the midst of plenty. It has the dual effects of boosting the domestic economies of the custodian of the loot and worsening of the economies of the countries from where the money was stolen. The result of the practice is that the gap between the rich and the poor widens as it happens in Nigeria.

Furthermore, vices negate progress in any life, system or organization but it becomes a thing of worry when the teeming population of youth is plagued with this predicament as they are the future leaders. Apart from that, the youthful stage is the most active stage in the life of any human being. The workforce of the youth is undoubtedly the driving force of any economy and nation. Any country whose workforce is characterized by a youthful population involved in social vices will amount to an erroneous, erratic, vain and corruption-ridden society (Achor, 2015). When the vast majority of youths are involved in vices, there exists a great probability that the leadership and governance will decline as so many find their way in these leadership positions and effect negative changes to suit their vicious appetite. This is exactly the case with Nigeria where the get rich quick syndrome is the guiding principle of average Nigerian.

Again, the moral degeneration in the Nigerian society has undesirable effects on family, schools, politics and the economy. According to Louw (2009), moral decay inhibits the prosperous growth and development of the country. The implications of this moral decay include the collapse of family and community life, the collapse of a culture of learning and teaching in schools, negative attitudes of the new generation in thinking that they are entitled to success and riches without working for it, dishonesty and lack of integrity, lack of self-discipline, crime, violence and corruption.

5. CHRISTIAN ETHICAL TEACHING AS A PANACEA TO THE MORAL CHALLENGES IN NIGERIA

Despite the existence of other ethical principles, the Christian ethics, which was inculcated by Christ, and represents Christianity on its practical side, as carried out in private, social and communal life, can be viewed as the highest code of ethics. Biblical ethics brings us to the outward manifestation of the inward work of grace. Being made righteous before God, it becomes imperative for us to live righteously before men and therefore shun all abnormal life styles for the good of the society. Christian morality believes and teaches that there should be no contradiction between profession and practice. What we believe must influence behaviour, and creedal affirmation must harmonize with conduct and character.

Let it be made clear here that Christian Religious Morality and ethical code is based on the "Golden Rule" as was instituted by Christ, the founder of Christian Religion in Matt 7:12, and the ten commandments also known as the Decalogue as seen in Ex. 20:1-17. The golden rule states: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt.7:12). The golden rule is an ethics of reciprocity. As it is implicitly understood, the golden rule indicates positive action or inaction, that is, never do harm to another. The "Golden Rule" says "Treat others as you would want to be treated in the same situation". While living by the golden rule will clearly make our society a better place, morally speaking, Christian ethical code even raise the standard further by the injunction of Christ Jesus. "A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another, as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples" (John 13: 34-35). Throughout all the epistles are scattered rules and directives covering the whole ground of private and social life. The apostles taught that as a man believes so must he behave. Creed must be reflected in conduct (Galatians 5:22-23; Colossian 3:12-17, II Peter 1:5-7, Titus 2:12) and vices shunned (Galatians 5:19-21; Colossians 3:5-9), love as the parents of all virtue, must be fostered (Romans 5:1, 2, 7, 8; 1 Corinthians 13). The Christian Moral teachings enjoins all adherent thus "we have committed the Golden Rule to heart,

Let us now commit it to conduct". When Nigerians live by the directives of the golden rule which prohibits everyone from doing anything that will hurt his neighbour, the moral decay in our society will become history. This is the position of the Christian moral codes and standard.

As mentioned earlier, the Decalogue is another scriptural base of the Christian morality. Unger (1982, p. 125) argued strongly that "the Decalogue existed from the beginning even before the fall of man because they are an expression of the external moral nature of God". Alexander et al (1983, p. 164), also noted that the Decalogue is a "basic ethical norm applicable to all ages". Since the contemporary Nigerian society has lost her moral track and piousness, the authors believe that the application of the Decalogue as taught by the Christian Moral Codes will bring it back to normalcy.

Each of the Decalogue presents moral principles that can transform the society. According to Echeta (2007), the first-four commandments (Exodus 20:3 -11) outlined man's duties towards God. The laws prohibited idolatry Ex. 20:3, the making of any representation of God, (Ex 20:4-6), the profane use of God's name (Ex 20:7) and honouring the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8-11). These enactments demand man's total obligation to maintain this vertical relationship and also his accountability. God earlier acknowledged his sovereignty with the introduction "I am the Lord thy God". The fifth commandment charges children and the young people with the moral principle of respect and honour within the family relationship Ex 20:12. This moral obligation charges children with the respect of parents to maintain strong and good moral disposition. In the light of the challenges faced by young people through their peer influence, the media, and other electronic gadgets, and their threat to character moulding, the need to re-emphasize this commandment is obvious.

The sixth law prohibits murder: Thou shall not kill. (Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:1). This law shuns all forms of killing. It should be noted and with alarm too that in our nation today, killing is done with a reckless abounded attitude. The sacredness attached to life appears to have been lost. The Dailies, television and radio reports are saturated with the news of killings which take different shapes. The sixth commandment condemns ritual killing, killing to achieve selfish gain, killing through abortion both for medical practitioners and the women culprits, and even killing during riots and demonstrations. The Christian Religious morals and teaching had continued to cry against such killings because it is a crime against God and humanity. Murder exposes the offender to God's wrath (Gen. 4:10 ff). There is much threat to life, and insecurity looms in the contemporary Nigerian Society. The application of the sixth commandment proffers solution to this unhealthy situation.

The seventh commandment prohibits Adultery (Ex. 20:14, Deut. 5:18). This law can be regarded as standard for all marriages. According to Craigie (1976), adultery is fundamentally an act of unfaithfulness displayed by a spouse against his/her partner. When married partner engages in sexual relationship outside his or her matrimonial home, it becomes an adulterous act. The seventh commandment totally condemns adultery and upholds the sacredness of marriage. It is no longer news today that marriage is terribly abused and many couples indulge in the act of adultery. In the Christian moral code, this law includes, prohibitions on lustful looks, motions, and verbal insinuations, mode of dressing, nude and pornographic films which provoke passions and incite one to this shameful act.

The Eighth Law which is a moral law prohibiting stealing (Ex.20:15), condemns avarice and wrong acquisition of excessive wealth by those in governance and positions of authority. In the Nigerian context, the governing authorities both in the secular and sacred circles focus on wealth acquisition at the expense of the followers. Echeta (2007) maintained that;

This law challenges leaders against the oppression, extortion and of further impoverishment of the poor and charges them to care for their need. This moral law extends to stealing by pen or arm of public funds, pilfering, fraudulent acts and current yahoo crime and the likes. (p. 189).

Stealing of children (kidnapping) for economic gain, manipulating others for personal gain are prohibited within the stipulation of the eighth commandment – thou shall not steal. It shuns dishonesty at all levels and must be propagated within the educational institutions, government circles, commercial sectors, religious institutions, and social organizations. It is pertinent to note that in Christian ethics, the use of false weights for measurement is prohibited (Prov. 11:1) and the denial of worker's wages, amounts to stealing.

The Ninth and Tenth laws raise objections against false witnessing and covetousness (Ex. 20:16 ff, Deut. 5:20-21). These commandments address the social system and interpersonal relationships. The injunction not to accuse falsely contextually applies adequately to the modern Nigerian society presently besieged with dishonest deals. The commandment not to bear false witness against a neighbour warns the police, lawyers, law enforcement agencies as well as hired false accusers in the law courts and traditional settings to desist from this act. Covetousness, though a moral law can only be judged correctly by God in his omniscient power. Echeta (2007) asserted that it is a law that deals with human self and feelings. He argued that;

This law may not be found in the code of criminal law but it is the root of the rest of the evils itemized in the other nine commandments. The prohibition of evil and inordinate desires if truly observed would create a better moral atmosphere in the society (p. 190).

These Christian moral principles, if imbibed by Nigerians, are capable of changing the state of moral decay in the country.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to address the moral degeneration in the country, the following recommendations are made:

1. The family is the first church where moral, religious and cultural values should be inculcated in the life of the young ones. To be able to achieve this, parents, guardians and upright elders of the community should do everything possible to teach and encourage the young ones of the importance of virtuous living.
2. In our schools and colleges Moral Education should be reintroduced and made a compulsory subject, to be consciously taught and practiced.
3. Outside the schools, religious leaders should be in the forefront of repairing the damages already done; and educating our people on how to live decent moral lives.
4. Educators should form partnership with parents, the mass media, the courts, civic, ethnic and religious groups to create a social and cultural context that supports the school's efforts to develop morally mature citizens.
5. Schools should make sure that moral education efforts are extended beyond the cognitive domain to include the affective and the psychomotor. It must go beyond simply knowing what is good to doing what is right or good.
6. Nigerians should do away with the teaching and practice of secular humanism and revert to our pre-colonial value system that highly placed and cherished good moral standards.
7. Government and other relevant agencies should monitor and regulate the type of information on our print and electronic media as well as other morally debasing materials circulating in our society today with the view of saving the younger generations from moral decay.

7. CONCLUSION

This discourse has highlighted the current moral lapses that are evident in all spheres of the Nigerian society. The paper took a look at the general concept of morality and Religion. It also took a critical look at the causes and effects of moral decay in the country. It is the belief of the authors that all hope is not yet gone in correcting the moral degeneration in the Nigerian society today. Before the colonial era, the common characteristics of the Nigerian society was the existence of norms that were pivotal to the running of the society. However, in recent times, all the prohibitions that aided the maintenance of high moral and disciplined society have been neglected and abandoned due to the influence of western culture mainly brought about by colonial invasion. Moral Education based on Christian morality and the application of it in our societal lives is the panacea to current moral disorientation and abuse in our society today.

Conflicts of interest

None

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